

A. Salem

## Social Critique after Post-Structuralism: Lessons from Luhmann, Lukács and Simmel

**Abstract.** *This article examines the views of three highly distinct social theorists – Niklas Luhmann, György Lukács and Georg Simmel – on the issue of modernity and its effects in an attempt to explore not just the considerable differences but also some common ground between them. It is argued that while these thinkers taken together encompass a wide spectrum of political opinion, and also cover a spectrum between technocratic and anti-rationalist views, those who, in various ways, sanction the rise of modernity and those who criticise it are in many ways in agreement about its characteristics. Beyond this the aim is to address the question of what an exchange between these theorists can reveal for the purpose of continuing a project of social criticism, at a time when any such project must take place in a post-structuralist intellectual context in which all knowledge is fundamentally provisional and uncertain. Even in this situation, it is argued, some positive recommendations can be made for such criticism's continuing role. The article concludes by making the case, in the dialogue opened up between these otherwise diverse theorists, for a more self-reflexive critical writing, one more aware of its own fragility, of the limits of the position from which it speaks, and of how much it is implicated in what it criticises, and outlines the possibilities for a non-essentialist and non-foundationalist approach to social critique.*

**Keywords:** *critical technique, social critique, social theory, Niklas Luhmann, György Lukács, Georg Simmel.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *kritikos metodai, socialinė kritika, socialinė teorija, Niklas Luhmann, György Lukács, Georg Simmel.*

*Lukács' version of Marxism plunges us at once into difficulties. Marxist theory, it is claimed, is the expression in thought of the revolutionary process; but it is Marxist theory itself which tells us that there is a revolutionary process, and defines its characteristics. Or to state the problem in another way: Marxism is in part a theory of class ideologies, yet at the same time it is (or may be represented as being) itself a class ideology; and its validity or worth as an ideology is held to depend in some way upon its truth as a theory. Lukács himself recognises, and discusses briefly, the difficulty which arises from the fact that historical materialism has to be applied to itself; his solution is to claim that Marxism is true in the context of a particular social form of production, namely modern capitalism, and thus to accept a qualified relativism.*

T. BOTTOMORE (1975; 98)

If contemporary criticism has become merely a part of 'the public relations branch of the literary industry, or a matter wholly internal to the academies' (Eagleton 1996; 7), this was not always so. Instead criticism, most strongly associated with Leftist thinking, had some function in the struggle against power relations, and in pointing towards alternative models that might serve as the basis for a different future. Some reasons for the decline of such political and social engagement in criticism include serious questions about who or what could produce large-scale transformation, the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' internationally, the workings of neoliberalism globally, and the effects of the postmodern turn, which by dwelling on indeterminacy tends to undermine attempts to create a different future.<sup>1</sup> The idea that the 'reality that just happens to exist' (Lukács 1971; 184) could in any way be different is hardly encouraged by such developments. Rather, thinking about alternatives to a globalised, economically neoliberal, techno-cultural and bureaucratic society is far from being widespread, regular practice, and it is no surprise that a socially active criticism is in decline, along with the Left with which it was once so closely linked.

In his book, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton refers to these issues when he writes:

Imagine a radical movement which had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if even then. The defeat I have in

mind is not just the kind of rebuff with which the political left is depressingly familiar, but a repulse so definitive that it seemed to discredit the very paradigms with which such politics had traditionally worked. (Eagleton 1997; 1)

In presenting this defeat in the form of a thought experiment, Eagleton is not claiming that critique is now impossible, far from it; instead he is pointing to a precondition for postmodernism's long-term development. While in many ways postmodernism appeals to the Left, or to the remnants of the Left, for Eagleton the problem is that this manner of thinking 'is politically oppositional but economically complicit' (ibid.; 132). He explains that postmodernism 'is radical in so far as it challenges a system which still needs absolute values, metaphysical foundations and self-identical subjects; against these it mobilizes multiplicity, non-identity, transgression, anti-foundationalism, cultural relativism'; but it also 'usually fails to recognize that what goes at the level of ideology does not always go at the level of the market', where 'plurality, desire, fragmentation' are all 'native to the way we live' (ibid.). On this view postmodern readings, despite their radical aspects, come close to directly reflecting the existing forms of commercial culture, to the extent that 'Many a business executive is in this sense a spontaneous postmodernist' (ibid.; 133).<sup>2</sup> Such readings may reinforce the way things already are, rather than begin to ask how they might be moved beyond.

Eagleton's view of postmodernism is not simply negative. He does not deny postmoder-

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Jameson (1998).

<sup>2</sup> See also Jameson (1998).

nism's strengths, but sees it 'in the end' (ibid.; 135) as being one of the problems facing Leftist critique today. In this context, certainly, for criticism to go back to older values would be deeply problematic. It is not merely the difficulties of, for example, straightforwardly being able to identify groups that could bring about major and lasting social change, or of the prevalence of a commercial culture that does not create widespread enthusiasm for any such change, or even simply of finding an appropriate language with which to draw attention to inequality and its consequences.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is that the very act of talking about these matters is itself subject to criticism on a post-structuralist or postmodern viewpoint. As Michael Billig and Herbert Simons put it:

No voice is secure in this mood of promiscuous critique. No claim is to be privileged – not even the claim to be exposing the claims of privilege. The voice of ideology critique, confident in the powers to expose 'the real' behind 'the appearance' of ideas, is suspected of suppressing the voices of others and of making unwarranted, foundationalist claims about the 'real'. Thus, the radical urge to re-assert the suppressed voices of others (or, more generally, the voice of the Other) and to expose the illusions of the powerful is turned against itself. Radicalism is radically suspect if it claims to know 'the truth'. (1994; 7)

Is it possible to critically comment on the present and point towards a better future when

there can be no claim to be telling the truth? How far are critics' efforts implicated in the very ideological or social structures they try to represent? In a modest way, this article hopes to address such questions. While it covers the views of three very specific and highly distinct thinkers – Georg Simmel, György Lukács and Niklas Luhmann – it is intended as a contribution to wider debates on the future for critical thought following the post-structuralist attack on epistemological certainties, of which the book of essays *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique* (1994), edited by Simons and Billig, is a good example.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that this article is not an examination of the ideas of Simmel, Lukács or Luhmann as such,<sup>5</sup> but rather an attempt to bring out some of their implications for the style and technique of social critique after post-structuralism. It does this by asking how far common ground can be discerned between their otherwise very different positions concerning modernity and its effects, and how far each might learn from each other for the purpose of continuing a project of social critique at a time when such criticism must take place in an intellectual context in which all knowledge is fundamentally provisional and uncertain. Three assumptions, which at various points overlap, underlie the work: (1) critical writing

<sup>3</sup> As Billig and Simons point out, the obscure, specialist language in which criticism is often expressed can mean that 'it is removed from the arena of direct action' (Billig and Simons 1994; 5). See also Berger (1998; 9–10).

<sup>4</sup> Other examples include Adam and Allan (1995); López and Potter (2001); Stierstorfer (2003); Powell and Owen (2007).

<sup>5</sup> I have written about these thinkers' ideas and their implications, particularly for agency-structure relations at various levels, elsewhere in this journal. See for example Salem (2014).

needs to recognise its lack of power politically and socially today, and to examine the reasons for its current condition;<sup>6</sup> (2) the effectiveness of criticism relies on extrinsic factors far beyond its own control; (3) there is no way of arriving at an Archimedean point of observation, no way of stepping around representation and fabrication to reflect things as they really are: since observation and interpretation cannot be separated, and since uncertainties and re-readings are written into all observations of external things, critics of the social world will have to consider how they themselves are implicated in what they protest against.

Taken together, the thinkers presented here encompass a spectrum of opinion over modernity. Simmel's work may be read as an early development of a post-structuralist point of view, though his cultural relativism is combined with a lingering sense of the 'real me' lost in the modern world of standardised systems which produce homogeneity, and thus in some ways is aligned with foundational or essentialist views of human identity and personality. Lukács's faith in a large-scale project of social improvement, in the power of human reason and collective agency to transcend the worst of modernity, translates into an attachment to realism, Marxism and modernism, coupled with anti-positivism.<sup>7</sup> With Luhmann a utopian, humanist modernism of the kind espoused by Lukács is replaced by a dystopian,

post-humanist vision of a world of cybernetic communications systems over which people have no control, and in which Luhmann adopts the viewpoint of those systems rather than that of their creators and users.

### **Autonomous Systems**

Luhmann, Lukács and Simmel are agreed that a defining feature of contemporary society is the existence and distribution of different formal systems with their own internal logic operating far beyond individual control. Yet while the presence and autonomous character of such systems with relation to their creators is agreed upon, there is no agreement on their effects. In Lukács there is, in his own words, a 'hatred' and 'contempt' for technological, administered, capitalist society (Lukács 1971; xi), and specifically for the way its systems come to seem like living beings even as their human subjects become more like the impersonal mechanisms that govern them: this position plainly derives from Marx's account of commodity fetishism, with its constant emphasis on the metaphorical links between the inanimate and the animate. Compared with Lukács, the oppositions that Simmel establishes between life and mechanism, or 'more-life' and 'more-than-life', reflect and reinforce a much more ambivalent position on the same issue, for while he certainly has misgivings about the lack of control that people

<sup>6</sup> On the problems that criticism faces, see for instance Berger (1998); Billig and Simons (1994); Eagleton (1996; 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Lukács's anti-positivist stance can be glimpsed in his statement that under capitalism scientific method cannot be applied to the social world without becoming 'a weapon of the bourgeoisie' (Lukács 1971; 10).

have over the systems they inhabit, he does not see this development as entirely negative. Above all, it is Luhmann who most fully stresses the autonomy of systems that people make, and without any trace of negativity. For him the simple fact is that systems in society share many characteristics with individuals: they have the power to observe their surroundings, to learn and to develop, to remember and to forget, and even to reproduce themselves. Indeed, Luhmann goes as far as to write that these systems 'presuppose "life"' (Luhmann 1995; 213). Behind this position is the belief that there is nothing so unique about human consciousness, or at least nothing that cannot also be attributed to other complex systems. For Luhmann the

initial (system-transcending) assumption is that *cognition* must be understood as a recursive processing of symbols (however they are materialized) in systems isolated by the conditions of the connectability of their own operations (be they machines, in the sense of artificial intelligence; cells; brains; consciously operating systems; or communication systems). (2002; 170, italics in original)

On this view, and against the deepest fears of Lukács and to a lesser extent those of Simmel, the systems of society have a character of their own; but one which is so far removed from the direct influence of human decision-making that Luhmann asks, in an intentional provocation aimed at humanistic thinking, 'who would seriously and deliberately want to maintain that society could be formed on the model of a human being, that is, with a head at the top

and so on?' (1995; 213).<sup>8</sup> Again, however, with all these thinkers there is no question of the autonomy of the system as such; it is only in their judgements that they differ from one another.

### Individual and Social

As a corollary of these considerations, it can be argued that Lukács, Luhmann and Simmel share a similar conception of the fundamental difference between the individual and the social. However they position themselves at various points between the two extremes in a way that closely reflects their humanist or post-humanist attitudes, and indeed their basic political concerns. It could be said that Lukács views the issue of the individual/social distinction from the perspective of the authentic individual, lost in a system which produces uniformity. In his worker and bourgeois schema, this scenario takes two different forms: the myth of individuality cultivated by the bourgeois, and the annihilation of individuality in the figure of the proletarian. In both cases, though of course unequally in terms of wealth and power, individuality is lost and the overweening capitalist economic and cultural system is held responsible. That Lukács takes the view of pure authenticity, of the free individual looking from the outside on an alien world – the world of society – is reflected in his very language. Individuals must 'free themselves from their awe of the capitalist world'; there must be 'hopes of a way out', a 'window to the future', a 'way for

<sup>8</sup> In terms of decisions, Luhmann writes that at best: 'decisions try to give a structure to the future. They cannot determine the future state of the world or the system but they can project a difference into its open horizons' (1996; 11–12).

mankind to escape' (Lukács 1971; xi). This is why Lukács views a change of consciousness as so important; it is a way to preserve authentic individuality by isolating it from the effects of reification – a way out, in short, and the starting point (but in itself no more than that) for transforming the systems deemed responsible. Conversely, Luhmann could clearly be seen as preferring the latter side of the individual/social distinction: he adopts the view of functional systems in society instead of the people inhabiting them. Here society from inside itself gazes out onto individuals, who are viewed as alien to it along with everything else (as in nature) in its environment. Another way to put the matter is that the problem for Luhmann is not how individuals are to find a way out of society, but how they may find a way into it. On his view, it is only when individuals dissolve themselves into pieces of information and participate fully in the communication system on its own terms that something which might be called 'individuality' can be given a concrete form. It is in this context that we should see Luhmann's comment that 'a consciousness is "silent" for society if and insofar as it does not participate in communication' (Luhmann 1994a; 29f.).

The position of Simmel in this schema is quite different, since he constantly shifts from the individual to the social and back once more, reflecting the fact that for him the two are forever inside and outside one another. On one level, Simmel in a similar way to Luhmann takes the view of systems instead of their creators, where human action is little more than a fleeting and momentary part of a larger narrative. This is apparent in, for instance, the

claim that when individuals participate in the social they become 'more fully developed in the functions appropriate' to the systems themselves (Weingartner 1959; 46). But at another level, the Bergsonian dualism that Simmel establishes between the organic and the inorganic, and between the temporal and the mechanical, is designed to mark off a portion of the individual as impervious to mechanics, of which the following passage is a reminder:

the later form of an organism which is capable of growth and procreation is contained in every single phase of organic life. The inner necessity of organic evolution is far profounder than the necessity that a wound-up spring will be released. While everything inorganic contains only the present moment, living matter extends itself in an incomparable way over history and future. (Simmel 1968; 28)

Here Simmel comes closer to Lukács who goes so far as to cite his predecessor on the 'non-reifiable remnant' (Simmel cited in Lukács 1971; 156–157) within the individual. In many ways, Simmel can be seen as a mediating figure between Luhmann and Lukács, who resists one side or the other of the individual/social distinction by attempting to do justice to the competing claims of both.

The different positions that these thinkers hold on the individual/social distinction has consequences, very much linked with the issue of observation, both for their self-descriptions and for their descriptions of society. The way Lukács looks on the social from the outside, from the perspective of an authentic individual presence, partly explains why society in his work is present only as a 'second nature', a monolithic system of barely differentiated parts in which

every facet (economic, political, cultural, etc.) is equally reified and has the same end result: in all of them the individual is lost. It could be said that Lukács posits a single viewpoint (an Archimedean point indeed) that would convey the reality or essence of the phenomena that he describes, where the status of society as a commodity is its most salient feature. Obviously this is correct, but only from a Marxist point of view. On the other hand, Luhmann's view from within society allows him to fix on the range of possible meanings attached to the social by a multiplicity of highly differentiated observing systems, though of course no description of 'society in society' (Stehr and Bechmann 2006; xxii) can ever say just what society is. This partly explains the emphasis placed by Luhmann on the 'political function system and its environment within society, the economic function system and its environment within society, the scientific function system and its environment within society, the religious function system and its environment within society', and so on (Luhmann 1995; 191). Here, and in contrast to Lukács, the notion of the shifting viewpoint is crucial, not in terms of arriving at the truth, but in terms of grasping the complexity of society:

Complexity can only be approached perspectively, and every advance varies more than it can control. Theory [...] claims *neither* to *reflect* the complete reality of its object, *nor* to *exhaust* all the possibilities of knowing its object. Therefore it does *not* demand *exclusivity* for its truth claims

in relation to other, competing endeavours. *But* it does claim *universality* for its grasp of the object in the sense that it deals with *everything* social and not just sections (as, for example, strata and mobility, particularities of modern society and patterns of interaction, etc.). (ibid.; xlvii, emphasis in original)

Plainly, Luhmann still presents himself as a scientist observing society in all its variety, albeit one of a very unusual sort. Of the claim to universality he writes: 'theories that claim universality are easily recognized by the fact that they appear as their own object. (If they wanted to exclude themselves, they would have to surrender the claim to universality.)'. He continues: 'theories that make a claim to universality are self-referential': 'they always learn something about themselves from their objects' (ibid.; xlvii).

Again, Simmel may be seen as confronting both Lukács and Luhmann in various ways. While his Bergsonism clings to a true notion of the self, and could be seen as bringing him in some ways close to Lukács, this is not a subject capable of action, but simply a marginal residue; it is only what remains after every other aspect of the individual has been subjected to social homogeneity, or to what Simmel calls the 'tragedy' of contemporary life. And while Simmel's view that all knowledge is entirely relative, that 'truth is a certain relationship to its object' (Simmel 1977; 83), allows for the representation of different viewpoints,<sup>9</sup> which

<sup>9</sup> Frisby and Featherstone write eloquently about Simmel's practice of 'placing sections of essays and thematic issues in a variety of different contexts within his own work. It is a practice which, in part, creates the impression of developing a conscious perspectivism – a viewing of themes from a variety of standpoints' (Frisby and Featherstone 1997; 1).

is analogous to Luhmann's practice, Simmel unlike Luhmann makes no claims to universality in the applications of his method. It could be said that while there is in some sense an ongoing engagement with science in Luhmann's work, Simmel's methodical relativism is on its own terms a principled refutation of science, at least as conventionally thought of.

### Self-Reflexive Critique

Our readings of the claims made for human action by Simmel, Lukács and Luhmann suggest that all action yields unforeseen consequences, that conscious, collective action is an unlikely project, and that individual action in the form of communication can have at best only a very limited, local and temporary effect. If these readings have any validity then, at least for the time being, one casualty is the theory-practice synthesis closely associated with Marxism, at least as classically conceived. In current circumstances, there can be no critical practice beyond theory itself – which leads directly into the interminable, proliferating field of information and data linked with the ideas of a communications theorist such as Luhmann. In this context, all or any critique finally serves the perpetuation of communications systems, and indeed is subject to a strict set of conditions from the very start. These limitations are addressed by Luhmann when he sarcastically asks: are 'consequences part of an action or not? And if not, what could interest us about an action besides its consequences?' (1995; xxxviii).

But the issue does not have to be put so negatively. There is a sense in which those very limitations point towards some positive

recommendations for the continuing role of criticism. For a start, if we accept that there is no necessary link between the intentions of the critic and the reception of the critique or, to put it in Luhmann's terms, that the utterance is nothing more than a 'selection proposal', a 'suggestion' (ibid.; 139), then the stated aims of the critic can be taken as only one possible meaning among many. Given this, it is as well to turn towards a more self-reflexive critique, one that draws attention to its own provisional, contingent nature from the beginning; as Luhmann puts it, 'the one doing the uttering foresees that at the moment of understanding the utterance is already incorrect' (2001; 26).

Also significant here is the linked issue of the paradoxical nature of observation; the 'observer cannot see what he cannot see. Neither can he see that he cannot see what he cannot see' (Luhmann 1994b; 28). It might seem as if a critique is saying something definitive about its target, but due to its non-identity with its subject it actually takes the opposite path, where an interpretation which makes sense on one level must fail on another. It may be that this issue cannot be resolved, but it is at least possible to go beyond the blindness associated with single viewpoints. Luhmann writes of 'a possibility of correction' through the 'observation of the observer'. He goes on to argue that: 'the second-order observer, too, is tied to his own blind spot, for otherwise he would be unable to make observations. The blind spot is his *a priori*, as it were. Yet when he observes another observer [himself included], he is able to observe *his* blind spot, *his a priori*, *his* "latent structures"' (ibid.; 28, italics in original). The

point is to reflect on the uncertainty surrounding observation and interpretation. In fact, this problem is recognised in different ways by both Lukács and Simmel: Lukács in writing of the blindness of normative philosophy and science to what remains beyond or beneath their constructions; Simmel in rejecting any one perspective of truth. Yet at the same time, both theorists also hold to essentialist views, Simmel in his Bergsonian mysticism, Lukács in his notion of the proletariat, with its privileged viewpoint for describing society. The utility of multi-perspectival strategies of this sort, incidentally, is conceded to even by neo-Marxist critics such as Andrew Arato when, in his essay on Luhmann, he says: 'I cannot accept that a purely hermeneutic-critical approach is a sufficient one for social science or even for social theory' (1994; 136f.). Luhmann himself addresses the issue more directly by stating that there is 'no privileged point of view, and the critic of ideology is no better than the ideologue' (1994b; 28).

In response, an obvious tactic is for a critical work to subject its objects, including 'itself as one of its objects' (Luhmann 1995; xlviii), to analysis from different points of view. Especially when set against the limitations of the single viewpoint, this tactic goes some way to matching the complexity of the method to that of its subject, and is likely to have more lasting consequences for the purpose of criticism. Such an approach, however, still leaves the matter of the paradoxical nature of observation essentially

unresolved. From the moment that it is released, the critique, no matter how resourceful or well-informed, is left open to alternative readings from a 'historical system' with a knowledge that far exceeds that of any critic: 'as soon as consciousness gives out signals which lead it to participate in communication, it makes itself dependent upon the possible course of the communication itself, that is, upon the social system' (Luhmann 2001; 16). As it persists through history, the critique will be subjected to 'a becoming-visible of its simplifications, its technical character, its functioning without any knowledge of the world' (Luhmann 1994a; 20), to the detailed scrutiny of its blindness, in short, which fuels the feedback mechanism of the system itself.

A further problem is that a critical work, inasmuch as it has a perceptible form at all, can be seen as a sequence of signs referring neither to the critic's intentions nor to external objects but only to itself. For Luhmann the 'very operation of referring' or 'designating' is itself a 'real operation', and 'one can no longer seriously think that only what it designates (refers to) is real': 'operating is an objectless enactment. [...] Real is what is practiced as a distinction, what is taken apart by it, what is made visible and invisible by it: the world' (1994a; 12, 13, 14). This differential capacity of 'perceptible form'<sup>10</sup> applies to all critical work, even to self-referential works that take form as their subject. For instance, Luhmann notes how even the 'exqui-

<sup>10</sup> In Luhmann 'all communication depends on the cooperation of conscious systems', and 'it must therefore assume a perceptible form. As communication it must take on a form, either acoustically or optically, in the media of possible perception' (Luhmann 1994b; 29).

site forms' of art for art's sake, 'and precisely these, still remain forms' (1994a; 13). Plainly it is the formal qualities of pieces of information that open them up to the 'recursive network of observations of observations' (Luhmann 1994b; 28) in the first place.

Nevertheless, such self-referential works, which refer to the transforming power of their own medium, are more resistant to observation than other works, at least temporarily. For a moment, says Luhmann, they may produce a 'paradoxical experiencing'. In them, if 'one sees this, one sees that, and if one sees that, one sees this. If one has reached a certain position, the opposing one is already in view, and vice versa. This kind of oscillation is autopoietically possible, one can have this kind of experience' (Luhmann 2001; 26). Luhmann takes this line of thought further with reference to poetry. He cites Novalis who writes that poetry 'represents the unrepresentable. It sees the invisible, feels the intangible', continuing that 'poetry is existentially affected by the problem of incommunicability. That is why it is this problem of incommunicability in particular that makes its presence felt in poetry and lyrical expression. There are, if one can put it this way, non-linguistic language devices available here for making visible what cannot be formulated' (Novalis cited in Luhmann 2001; 17, 15).<sup>11</sup>

Novalis of course holds to the Romantic view that the very distinction between signified and signifier 'makes us aware of what is being

missed in the attempt', arguing that in the fragmented form of the poem we 'feel ourselves as a part and are precisely for that reason the whole' (Novalis cited in Bowie 1990; 75).<sup>12</sup> Plainly this is to step onto provocative ground in Luhmann's view, for here a norm or ideal (an essence) is hinted at by literary means, even if it is not made explicit. In his account of Lyotard's book *The Différend* (1983), Luhmann's position on the issue becomes clearer. He writes that despite placing emphasis on the 'operative inevitability of difference, for Lyotard the temptation remains strong to think the unity of difference': 'a defiant sadness rests on the renunciation of unity – that old rhetorical unity' which 'at least in its mood holds on to what one knows to be lost' (Luhmann 1994b; 28).

Yet there is no sense in which moments of 'paradoxical experiencing' in the face of complex, contradictory forms pose a challenge to the functioning of communication systems. Here we should note Luhmann's remark that forms of meaning appear 'inconsistent, and this causes alarm. But the system's *autopoiesis is not interrupted*. It goes on' (Luhmann 1995; 373, emphasis in original). The point is that 'incommunicability' for Luhmann does not mean that the incommunicable exists alongside 'ongoing communication like a shadow, but rather that the expectation that certain communications will be carried out would run up against resistance and impossibilities or self-destructive effects' (Luhmann 2001; 23–24). Yet

<sup>11</sup> Novalis, Fragment No. 1901, *Novalis: Werke, Briefe, Dokumente*, Vol. 2, ed. Ewald Wasmuth (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1957; n.p.).

<sup>12</sup> Novalis, *Schriften Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, Vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968; 138).

Luhmann also notes that, prior to any further communication, ‘paradoxical communication’ can have an effect at the level of subjective experience: ‘one is brought to pose the question of escape (or of an interruption)’ (ibid.; 26). This gives some scope, it would seem, for the kind of consciousness-raising critique pursued by Lukács. But with regard to the problem that critical content is constructed from pre-existing forms and, as such, can always be incorporated into a wider system of communication in which content cannot be taken, and does not have an effect, only on its own terms, it is as well to take up the strategy of using the forms of communication against themselves, for instance by taking their lack of reference as a specific theme, or by thematising the processes of reproduction and appropriation themselves.

### **Critique in a Post-Structuralist Climate**

In very different ways, Simmel, Lukács and Luhmann alike draw attention to the limits of criticism. What a critical analysis of Simmel and especially Lukács makes clear is that social critique cannot simply be based on essentialised identities, where one aspect of the self or the world is constructed as authentic so as to reveal other aspects as essentially false. On the other hand, Luhmann generally fixes on the conditions under which critique is produced,

so that, for instance, ‘if one does not wish to flee into the imaginary space of an “other society,” then the critique of research can only be carried out as research’ (Luhmann 1994a; 22). Clearly, what these considerations do not provide is much room for a critique that has any significance other than as a means to sustain the communication networks of society. There is however, I would suggest, some room for criticism to take on such a role, even if its effects are likely to be marginal and to an extent independent of what critics actually say. Given this, critics may if they choose attempt to oppose the claim that we can ‘virtually say only what it is possible to say in a given context’ (Luhmann 2001; 16); by becoming more self-reflexive and self-aware, by combining various strategies and points of view, and by thematising what Luhmann on rare occasions calls ‘the lamentable condition of the world’ (1994a; 13). Such a mix of critical tactics and techniques is already present in the writings of Luhmann, Lukács and Simmel, when taken together. Certainly the effects of the resulting ‘rather hopeless appeal to politics’, as Luhmann puts it (1994b; 28), will be limited and, at least in the current context of social atomisation, effective solely or largely at the level of individual consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Plainly, a critical practice of this kind is compromised; nevertheless, it can play a role in reviving politically engaged social criticism and theory following the ‘political ambiva-

<sup>13</sup> This problem calls to mind Theodor Adorno’s ‘strategy of hibernation’ (Habermas 1983; 142), where in the absence of the kind of collective agency that could influence radical social change, critique withdraws at least temporarily into forms of aesthetic contemplation. Understandably, Jürgen Habermas complains that this is ‘a mode of reception that leads down the royal road to bourgeois individuation’ (Habermas 1979; 43–44, cited in Kogawa 1980–81; 152).

lences of postmodernism' (Eagleton 1997; 132) that Eagleton and many others have rightly complained about. So, for instance, 'a rhetoric that justifies homelessness, unemployment, increasing impoverishment, disempowerment' by appealing to 'supposedly traditional values of self-reliance and entrepreneurialism' (Harvey 1995; 337, 336) may be rigorously opposed. The overall effect might best be described as a revived modernism in terms of confronting abject conditions, but without the certainty and prescriptiveness of the past, exemplified by Lukács's modernist faith in moral and social progress through the writing of criticism. On one level, dominant cultural forms, not least the vast and well-funded propaganda efforts of business and state, can be called into question by a critique which stresses their ideological assumptions, their highly generalised nature and their reliance on things left unsaid with the aim of challenging their coherence and making their hegemony difficult to accept. All three thinkers offer possibilities in this respect, among them Lukács's critique of bourgeois ideology insofar as it presents factional interests as universal ones, Simmel's systematic relativism, which highlights the inadequacy of any single view of the world (or the self), and Luhmann's analysis of the relationship of communications to their environment in which specific meanings are contingent and transient.

Yet, on another level, since such tactics could equally be applied against critics' ar-

guments themselves, their practices must be qualified as rhetorical and partial, with the result that they can offer 'only one possible formulation of the social among others' (Vandenberghe 1999; 55). Criticism, then, cannot represent its findings as universal truths. Plainly this goes some way to accepting the post-structuralist view that 'social and cultural reality, and the social sciences themselves, are linguistic constructions' with no 'ultimate logical or empirical warrant' (Brown 1994; 13). Just this attitude is apparent in Simmel and Luhmann, for each in their way questions the very basis of objective knowledge. Yet this relativism in epistemological terms need not involve a suspension of judgement in terms of value.<sup>14</sup> This is part of the point about Simmel's view that 'truth is a certain relationship to its object' (Simmel 1977; 83), which may be related to more recent work by such writers as Richard Harvey Brown, who argues that people 'enact truth and justice' in part by 'rhetorical performance', continuing that 'norms of cognition and of conduct' are not generally 'viewed merely as objective products, but also as symbolic processes that are inherently persuasive' (1994; 25). Indeed we can find signs of a similar attitude in Lukács whose insistence that Marxism is in no way a 'sacred' body of work implies that it is one ideology among many (1971; xxv–xxvi, 1). Notably, however, this does not lead Lukács to conclude that Marxism is no better than any other ideology in accounting for economic and social

<sup>14</sup> Brown and others have rightly argued that contemporary criticism can reject 'judgemental relativism', while acknowledging 'epistemological relativism'. See Brown (1994; 7, 27–28) and Bhaskar (1998).

injustice. Against Luhmann's claim that 'the critic of ideology is no better than the ideologue' (1994b; 28), value judgements can be made about the merits of different bodies of work for different purposes, even if in epistemological terms these judgements amount to little more than cultural choices made by critics and their readers. This is because, in the end, the words of critics do not have to work only or even mainly in terms of objective description: it is rather the subjective opinions of others that will provide the test for critics' claims. Criticism's potential for bringing about change will depend not on the 'truth' of critics' words but on other people's reactions to them, including their emotional and intellectual responses.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion: the Problem of a Social Base for Critical Thought**

The problem then is less a matter of whether individual critics can, as Bourdieu puts it, 'throw their grain of sand into the well-oiled machinery of resigned complicities' (2003; 65), than of how such efforts may become connected to a broad movement of opposition that takes in

different groups, overcoming differences of, for example, class, gender, nation and 'race'. While it can obviously no longer be restricted to workers or their spokespersons, Lukács's call for a new counter-hegemonic movement (1971; 289), made after the breakup of the Second International due to sectarian disputes, is still applicable here, demonstrating both the need for such a movement and the challenges it will have to face. It is also apparent that its adherents will need to set up democratic processes of the sort that Lukács recommends as a way to prevent the lapse into authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup> Other thinkers (like Bourdieu) have laid the groundwork for such a counter-culture in the present situation.<sup>17</sup> The possibilities for its emergence may seem remote, if less so in times of crisis, but they are nonetheless present and, given what has rightly been called 'the weight of the world' (Bourdieu et al. 1999) in terms of the suffering that occurs within it, are certainly worth examining. And critics, 'each in their own place and their own fashion, and to however small an extent' (Bourdieu 2003; 65), can play a part in exploring them.

<sup>15</sup> This is the context for Bourdieu's response to Spinoza's claim that 'true ideas bear no intrinsic force'; for Bourdieu, even if this is the case, writers can still 'give *symbolic force*, by way of artistic form, to critical ideas and analyses' (2003; 25, emphasis in original).

<sup>16</sup> See especially Lukács (1971; 334–337).

<sup>17</sup> One the most prominent of these is Bourdieu who has written of the need for 'a new internationalism' founded on dialogue and collective activity among grass-roots movements, single-issue groups, trade unions and intellectuals (Bourdieu 2003; 24–25, 74–81). In Bourdieu's terms the reason for this is that the 'whole edifice of critical thought is in need of reconstruction. And this work of reconstruction cannot be effected, as some have thought in the past, by a single great intellectual, a master thinker endowed with the sole resources of his singular thought, or by the authorized spokesperson for a group or an institution presumed to speak in the name of those without a voice' (ibid.; 21).

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## SANTRAUKA

### SOCIALINĖ KRITIKA PO POSTSTRUKTŪRALIZMO: KO GALIMA PASIMOKYTI IŠ LUHMANNO, LUKÁCSO IR SIMMELIO

Straipsnyje aptariamas trijų žymių teoretikų – Niklaso Luhmanno, György Lukácsó ir Georgo Simmelio – požiūris į modernybę ir jos poveikį pasaulio pažinimui. Nors šių teoretikų politinės ir intelektualinės nuostatos labai skiriasi – svyruoja nuo grynai technokratinio požiūrio iki antiracionalistinės laikysenos, – dėl svarbiausių modernybės savybių sutaria tiek jos kritikai, tiek šalininkai. Aptariant, kas minėtus mąstytojus skiria ir kas jiems yra bendro, siekiama parodyti, kuo jie gali būti naudingi plėtojant socialinę kritiką intelektualinėje poststruktūralizmo aplinkoje. Net ir tokiam kontekste, kai bet koks žinojimas traktuojamas kaip iš esmės šališkas ir neapibrėžtas, šių teoretikų darbuose galima atrasti kai kurių pozityvių sprendinių, naudingų socialinės kritikos projektui. Norėdamas plėtoti neesencialistinę ir nefundamentalistinę socialinės kritikos prieigą bei kritišką rašymą, pasižymintį didesne savirefleksija, kritikas turėtų apmąstyti ir suvokti kelis dalykus: savo kritikos sąlygiškumą ir trapumą; pozicijos, iš kurios kalbama, ribotumą; kiek struktūrinė kalbančiojo pozicija nulemia patį kritikos turinį.

School of Social Sciences  
Leeds Beckett University  
City Campus, Leeds, LS1 3HE, UK